

Does Your Life Matter?

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Does Your Life Matter?

THE PROBLEM

HAS life any meaning? Is there sufficient reason why a man should exert himself and develop such resources as he possesses even when this course of action involves doing difficult tasks, foregoing certain enjoyments, submitting to treatment which may seem senseless or worse?

We know ourselves or can call to mind illustrations from the lives of others what a difference it may make when a man is able to see his life, his every action and the circumstances in which he is placed, in the light of some great and worthy purpose. It frees his energy, transforms his character and advances him along the way to physical, mental and spiritual maturity. Give a person, who is himself willing, a thoroughly worthwhile task, one that challenges the best in him, and you restore that man to life.

Can we see all life as fulfilling or capable of

fulfilling some great purpose; our own lives, the lives of others, the whole of creation? To do so is to believe in a divinely appointed vocation for one's self and for every living creature. It means that we declare our faith that God has called each of His creatures into life for a purpose worthy of Himself and His loving character.

Can we believe this in the face of the facts presented by human experience? This is the question that sets the "problem" for this paper.

THE FACTS

WE are creatures,—beings who did not make ourselves. The significance of this fact impresses us when we realize that we had no choice in the matter or manner of our birth. Nor could we determine the nature of the world into which we were born. So much was done for us without even an "ask your leave." Whether we should be male or female, dark-skinned or light-skinned, what our general heritage and environment should be,—all this was established for each of us. We opened our eyes to find a world already in motion and a human race,—of which we were a part,—that had a well-formed tradition.

Slowly to this humble beginning we added the experience garnered in the years of our living. Here, too, there is a set of facts which may be simply presented. First, there is the whole galaxy of desires and demands which we levelled on the world, on ourselves, on society, on God. We desired happiness, success, power, friendship, and these at definite times and in concrete form. Sometimes we were able to attain an appreciable measure of satisfaction for these cravings. Other times we were rebuffed or worse, being treated in a fashion quite contrary to our wishes. The world went on its way oblivious and seemingly quite uninterested in our fortunes. We encountered those brutal, uncontrollable factors: suffering, injustice, death.

THREE GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THESE FACTS

IT is possible to summarize the reactions of people to these facts under three groupings. These basic attitudes are, of course, modified in an unlimited variety of ways.

(1) There is the attitude commonly known as

scepticism. We define scepticism here as the viewpoint which results from the conviction that there is no meaning to life, particularly human life. Accordingly, it is futile to speak of vocation, of being created to fulfill any great purpose. There is no meaning to be attached to one's birth. Men just happen. They merely appear, items in a senseless, chaotic universe. Once on this planet experience confirms this judgment for is it not just as chaotic as all else,—giving no evidence of pattern or abiding purpose? Men must recognize themselves as puppets in the grip of dumb, irrational forces which are going nowhere, accomplishing nothing. Any vague religious faith inherited from parents and society is rendered bankrupt before the realization of the vastness of the universe and the strength of the undirected powers moving it. Reason cannot swallow the statement that God, Creator of this impersonal immensity can or will take an unique interest in each living creature.

The consequence is that people who accept such conclusions must adopt an attitude of complete cynicism, making fun of even their own inner life of desire for friendship, love and

power, or they must resort to the irrational attempt to impose their wishes and purposes upon an unwilling universe which will sooner or later rise up and make havoc of their ambitions. Self-originated vocations on the part of weak creatures are at best the brave efforts of desperate spirits. I call upon myself to be a man in the midst of and in opposition to an inhuman world.

(2) There is the viewpoint known as fatalism, which we define as the belief that there are forces in this universe which are tending to the working out of some great purpose, but that, by and large, these forces operate regardless of one's wishes and nature. Human beings do play a part in this world-drama, but as individuals they have no eternal worth or significance. All must be sacrificed for the good of the whole. It is the family or the race or life itself which matters. If this larger entity can be served best by the annihilation of any single creature, there is nothing wrong in that.

People who adopt this attitude as the result of mulling over the facts we have placed before us are at best stoics,—a very noble best it may be, too. While they await the working out of this

unknown gigantic plan they desire to endure with such courage and self-restraint as they can muster the violation of their own wishes and dreams, presenting a calm, cheerful countenance to their friends, reticent concerning their own disappointments and disillusionments.

(3) The third attitude is that of religious faith. We limit ourselves to the consideration of the faith of Catholic Christendom; the faith of those who have been baptised into the name and life of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. It is the assertion of the Christian faith that "man is the roof and crown of creation," and that each man is called by our common Father, to fulfill a unique purpose. This vocation is known fully to God alone. It is revealed partially to each man of good will, so that he is never without the light and opportunity of advancing along the way of his divinely appointed vocation. This declaration of faith,—that the life of every man is important to God,—is put forward as the most satisfying and honest explanation of the facts. This is not to say that the Christian outlook on life is without difficulties or rough corners. There are manifold unsolved

problems. Yet, it is a rational faith, cleaving to an assertion which does not deny the most intractable of facts, the most enduring ideals of the inner life, or the revelations which form the basis of religion. Each believing soul can say of itself in an hour of life or death, of joy or suffering, of success or failure,—“I come from God, I belong to God, I go to God,”—and know this to be a reasonable conviction whatever the circumstances.

THE CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW

THE growth in our knowledge of the universe and of man's place in it through the perfecting of the sciences has not invalidated the Christian philosophy. This knowledge has altered it and will undoubtedly do so again, but the fundamental outlook remains unchanged. The universe has opened itself before the exploring genius of the human mind to reveal its immensity and complexity. Yet, man whose mind penetrates ever deeper into these realms of mystery remains "the roof and crown of creation,"—called of God to fulfill a unique and precious destiny.

With the knowledge now at our disposal we have different notions of the manner in which God has worked and continues to work creatively. No longer do we believe that man appeared fully formed and equipped upon the earth at any specific time. Rather we incline to the hypothesis,—it remains no more certain than this,—that God has been working through all the ages of the world's existence with infinite patience to create a free, intelligent spirit,—man. That basic entity, energy, becomes knotted up into more and more complex forms until as the climax of the whole movement there emerges a human being who is capable of the response of love. The whole process is vindicated and reveals its significance in man. He is the highest product of the universe and the key to it. He is made "in the image of God," free, intelligent, capable of love; in order that by effort he may become like God, sharing His life. This is his importance, the value placed upon him by God. God's creative love is poured forth in order that there may be as the result of it a creature who can freely respond to the Father and by his creaturely love return all to God.

THE CHRISTIAN'S VOCATION

THERE is one vocation which all men hold in common. Any particular vocation such as that to the Religious Life, the priesthood, the married life must never conflict with this more comprehensive call. They must be ancillary to it.

This vocation which belongs to us all is the call to holiness. "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." This is the standard of holiness to which we are to aspire. Our Lord Jesus also gave us a hint as to the nature of the Father's holiness when He said, "He (the Father) maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." The perfection of the Father's love and good-will is the unconditional way in which He loves us. He acts generously toward us not because of what we are or do, but because of what He Himself is. He loves us whether we deserve His good-will or no. He loves us anyhow, for He is Love.

We who are treated by God in such a gracious manner are called to emulate Him in love, to share His life and activity. If we search our own hearts and examine the dominant desires

of those close to us we will recognize how insistently we long for this perfect holiness. We want to live with those who will forgive us not seven times, but seventy times seven, those who will love us anyway, despite our pettiness. We desire friends whose good-will is not limited by the contract,—“If I do you a favour, then you must return it.” It is not bargain hunters but those who love unconditionally, spontaneously, who make true friends. We ourselves long to be one of those who love as God loves. To be a success in the only worthy sense of that term is to be a saint, one who is on fire with the love of God, learning to trust ever more profoundly in Him, trying to love God and His creatures more selflessly. In contrast, the supreme sorrow for any human being is not death, suffering or poverty, but the failure to strive to be perfect as God is perfect. We were created in His image, free, intelligent spirits capable of responding to His love, in order that we might become like Him and be “partakers of the divine nature.” This is our vocation. To fail in this, to cut ourselves off from this line of development and stream of life is the greatest sorrow which can

happen to any man.

Consider now, in the light of all that has been said about our vocation, the facts of our experience, especially those stubborn, unmanageable facts of suffering and injustice which seem so contrary to belief in a loving God and a worthy destiny for every soul. Do they make faith impossible? Indeed not! In the final analysis, there is only one demand which we need to level upon God and His universe. It is this,—that we never be situated so that we are deprived of the opportunity to love and to advance in this life of divine holiness. What joy is ours who know that it is just this of which God has promised never to rob us. He sent His only begotten Son who loved “even unto death, the death of the cross.” In the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the triumph of love is proclaimed, despite injustice, suffering, death. Our faith declares and our experience confirms His victory, for we know that no single soul need be deprived of this one great necessity,—the possibility of loving and so of fulfilling its humanity.

The most disturbing facts of our experience,—the suffering of the innocent,—take their place

along with the others as the raw material out of which we are to fashion personalities and characters like unto that of our blessed Lord. We are to do all we can to remedy such situations and to prevent them. Our sympathy and grief must continue to be telling and real. Yet, whether we be onlookers or the ones who suffer, by our faith we know there is no final tragedy to those who love God. Rather, by faith and heroic love the innocent sufferer enters deeply into the redemptive love of Jesus Christ, with Him and in Him raising earth to heaven. As we behold faithful souls in such travail we must recognize that we are in the presence of divine holiness. A soul is being borne aloft and is elevating itself to that wondrous destiny which is offered to all mankind.

"Dearly beloved: whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."

INDIVIDUAL VOCATIONS

THE vocation of any individual,—your vocation, for instance,—must be consonant with this catholic vocation to holiness. One need not

fear he has betrayed God so long as he is earnestly and bravely seeking to fulfill the divine love. Yet it is true, gloriously true, that each soul is called by God the Father to attain to a unique and precious excellence, and thereby to give Him a joy that no other can.

Individual vocations are indicated in two general ways. First, the field of choice is limited by the conditions imposed or permitted by God. Under this general classification come those factors of heredity and environment which cannot be altered. It might also be enlarged to include certain basic and almost universally recognized moral obligations, such as the care and support of an invalid parent. There is, secondly, all that falls within the range of one's own volition. Each day of our lives we make choices which are either an acceptance or a rejection of God's challenge to holiness and love. The more we pray well and use the sacraments of the Church faithfully the more readily will we perceive His invitations and have the grace to respond to them fully. Yet, we must remember that seldom indeed does God reveal to any soul more than the next few steps or the general path He desires it

to follow. He acts ever to forward us in love, and that implies our freedom. He challenges, invites, pleads; He does not coerce. We recognize His voice by the presence in any given situation of the opportunity to love, the signs of joy and peace.

Some souls God calls to what is technically termed, the Religious Life. It presents itself to the soul as an insistent call to holiness, a single-hearted desire for God's perfection. As a result of human response to this loving challenge of Almighty God there has been established in the Church militant the life of the three vows, obedience, chastity and poverty. These vows are the practical working out of this inner call and desire. Obedience is required since these men and women know that self is the great enemy which stands between them and their heart's desire. Chastity is the way in which they bind themselves to a single-hearted, direct love of God. Poverty enables them to place their entire dependence upon Him. Finally, all is undertaken in order that they may in their several ways fulfill what is written of their Lord in St. John's gospel: "For their sakes I sanctify Myself." The

life of monks and sisters is not established or their vocations justified until it issues in an ever-deepening life of service through continuous prayer, the showing forth of the attractiveness of holiness, and the performance of good works.